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THE CRAYON.

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PICTORIAL REPRESENTATION OF CHRIST.

BY O. S. HENRY, D. D.

To the Editors of the Crayon:

I PROMISED you some contribution to the columns of "THE CRAYON;" but I am now almost sorry, that such a layman as I am in most matters pertaining to art, should have consented to your request. When I say, layman, I mean in regard to the arts of form and color, for I should be loth to think myself incapable of some right feeling and right judging in poetry. In the plastic arts I am afraid, what slender appreciation I have, is nearly limited to what may be called their poetic side, their sentiment, their spiritual expression—and with but small culture even on that side. Since, however, expression is the great law of all art, and since every work of art should express something to the universal mind and heart of man, so that expression may be truly felt and rightly judged of, even by one who is altogether incapable of analyzing the conditions and processes of its production, so, too, in a more general view, the grounding principles of art, as they lie in the constitution of human nature—the common end of all the arts with their different instruments of expression—their respective limitations in their several spheres—and their relation to the culture of humanity generally, whether in a philosophical or historical view: these and such like topics may, perhaps, furnish scope for the furtherance of the interests of art and the culture of the public taste, even by one who is no artist. Some contributions of this sort, I may, perhaps, be able to make to the pages of your journal, in the success of which, I need not tell you, I take a lively interest.

I venture to offer at this time, some remarks on the Artistic Representation of Christ—a subject in regard to which, a number of questions may be raised: in the first place, about the fitness of attempting any sensible representation or rather portraiture of our Lord's person; next, as to the conceptions fit to be embodied, both generally and particularly; and lastly, how far it is possible for art to realize a fitting conception in any way adequate or worthy enough to sanction the attempt.

As to the first of these points—the only one I shall now consider—I have never felt that there is anything improper, anything wrong, in attempting to make sensible representations of our Lord, in his form and person, his life, passion, death, etc. It never struck me as objectionable, either on the score of irreverence, or as tending to idolatrous superstition. It was, therefore, with considerable surprise, that I came to learn it was ever a matter of scruple with any artist. It is more than a dozen

years ago, in a little company, the conversation turned on the representation of our Lord's Passion, the ideas to be embodied in it, etc. I ventured some remarks, which our friend WEIR (who happened to be present), afterwards desired me to put down for him in writing. I did so, and not long afterwards I received from him a letter in return—in which, passing by all questions as to the ideas to be embodied, he goes directly to the previous question, as to the propriety itself of any attempt at a delineation of the Saviour's person. This letter I have his permission to print here, and I copy it, because it is a clearer and more learned statement of the argument on one side of the question than anything I could present, and as coming from so good a man and so noble an artist, it will, I am sure, be read with additional pleasure:

"WEST POINT, Nov. 18th, 1844.

"MY DEAR SIR:—I received your long letter last evening, and was glad to learn some of your thoughts on the propriety of representing in pictorial art, the person of our Saviour. It is a subject that I have often thought of, and always with a degree of dread arising from the awful character of Him, who bought us with His blood and is our Judge.

"In the Early Church—those primitive times to which we are now so anxious to conform, there was some great obstacle to the personal representation of our Saviour: they indicated Him only by symbols—the various monograms of His name, the cross, the anchor, the ship, the lyre, the palm, the fish, the lamb, the vine, etc.; and this forbearance to the direct personality of our Saviour continued throughout the first, second, and third centuries; and even in the fourth, we learn that St. Epiphanius tore down a curtain, on which was painted a figure of Christ.

"When the mysteries of His birth, actions, sufferings, resurrection and ascension were represented, it was done by depicting the corresponding events in the Jewish prophecies, which of course, only intimated the ideas they contained; as Moses striking the rock—the spiritual Rock from which they drank; Abraham sacrificing his son—the Crucifixion; Daniel in the lions' den, or Jonah—the passage through the Valley of Death; Elijah ascending to heaven—the Ascension of Christ, etc. Sometimes He was indicated as a young man watching the sheep, at times caressing them, or carrying them in his bosom, and at others sorrowing for the lost ones. In this character the crook or pipe was often placed in his hand.

"Then came the GENIUS of His supernatural power; who, under the form of a youth performed the various miracles—still evincing the same repugnance of His positive individuality. Why was this antipathy to the pictorial representation of one

whom they loved—who had redeemed them? Was it the power and influence of the Second Commandment, which binds and controls us Christians as well as the Jews?

"When once this veil was rent, and the image of the Holy One exposed to view, we find Sts. Athanasius, Eusebius, Jerome, and others exclaiming against it, and charging its introduction upon the gentiles. As our numbers increased, we became bolder and did not hesitate to depict the spotless Lamb of God, our awful Judge, with all the individuality we could possibly conceive; and the development has now reached the commemorative sacrifice—we have the "mystery unveiled," and the Holy Record made a common school-book.

"With the above exception I agree with you, and think that the walls of our churches might be made to convey sacred lessons, in language more like that of God than any other—addressing itself at the same moment to the minds of the faithful of every tongue. Let the symbol of the Crucifixion, the Altar of the atonement, the Record of the price, be our grand altar-piece; and the side-walls convey the precepts of Him who bought us; those acts of mercy—feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, comfort the afflicted, etc., which would compel us to remember our duty as pledged followers of our Master.

"Pardon what I have said; I have written more with a view to open to you (if possible), the ground of my prejudice, than with the slightest motive to oppose what you have said. In your conversation there was a gleam of sunshine that appeared to illuminate, or dissolve the difficulties, and which induced me to ask you to repeat in writing, what then fell from you. Your letter is full of thought and must be read again and again. In the meantime, let me urge you to proceed in your labor, and if I cannot do all that you wish, I hope you will not refuse the little I can give.

"Yours, very sincerely,

"ROBT. W. WEIR."

I may, perhaps, say that the reference in the last sentence of this letter, is to a series of Meditations on the various scenes in the history of our Lord's Passion, intended to accompany a set of designs which I desired him to make, in accordance with the principles expressed in my letter to him. That letter I do not send you, because it relates mainly, as I have intimated, to a different question from that which is considered in his reply. I shall confine myself to a few remarks upon the views he presents.

Admitting the historical truth of our friend's representation—and I am certainly not disposed to call it in question—it seems to me obviously, not conclusive against the

moral fitness of pictorial delineations of our Lord's person, or against their religious expediency in any absolute and universal way. There is nothing in the New Testament which directly or indirectly forbids it, and I find no proof that the first Christians were instructed by the apostles, in any teachings not preserved in the authoritative documents of Christianity, to regard it as wrong in itself, or injurious in its tendency and effects: so that, admitting all that is said of the repugnance of the early Christians to such delineations, it is still open to inquiry what were their reasons for this repugnance, and whether they are sound and valid for us, and for all times.

The founders of Christianity were Jews, brought up under the powerful influence of the old Hebrew religious culture. The Old Testament is full of strict and awful prohibitions not only of idolatry, but of any attempt to give sensible form to the idea of JEHOVAH, the purely SPIRITUAL God, the DEITY UNMANIFESTED in any determinate form. From reverence the Hebrews abstained even from pronouncing the very NAME, giving always to the letters when they met them in their Holy Books another sound, the utterance of a less awful word.

Now, though Christianity, in contradistinction to the old Hebrew religion, is precisely the religion of "God manifest in the flesh," a revelation of the Invisible in a visible, determinate, historical form, yet as the first Christians were taught to regard our Lord as at once God and Man, it would not be at all strange if they shrunk from any artistic representation of the Manifested Divinity, in the same way as they did from giving sensible form to Jehovah, the Undisclosed, whom it was impious to image, forbidden to figure under any likeness. This would be very natural, and some such feeling may likely enough have been very prevalent. But it concludes nothing as to the question before us. The prohibition to figure Jehovah, the Absolute, undisclosed in any sensible form, cannot in its own force be necessarily extended to the portraiture of the Son of God, sent in a visible human form. And I am unable to conceive any reason based upon the Second Commandment, or drawn from any other source, which ought to have deterred a competent portrait-painter (supposing such an one to have been among those about our Lord), from taking an exact likeness of Him, as He appeared during his historical presence on the earth. What, if such a portrait had come down authenticated along the ages to our times! Should we in any way feel bound or disposed to turn from it, as something impious to have been taken, wrong to copy, wrong to gaze upon?

But the early Christians were mainly, I think, deterred from making pictorial representations of our Lord's person, by considerations of religious prudence, which are now of no force. They were surrounded by idolaters, by temples filled with images of the gods of the heathens. Statues and pictures of Christ might come to be classed in the same category with the images of the false gods, and so the pre-ëminent dignity and exclusive pretensions of the Christian religion might suffer disparagement and even run the risk of being taken as a mere idolatrous superstition.

Supposing such to have been the feeling of the early Christians, it obviously has no bearing upon the question, whether the person of our Lord is a proper subject for artistic representation now-a-days.

But, passing from this, I will conclude with one or two remarks of a more general nature. It seems to me it is scarcely worth while to say anything in regard to any supposed tendency to superstitious abuse of pictorial representations of our Lord. I am unable to conceive in what way anything harmful can come from the contemplation of such works, supposing them, of course, to be true works of art, conceived and executed in the spirit of religious reverence; unless it be in a way in which every religious idea, and every form of expressing it, is liable to superstitious abuse—which would be an objection practically amounting to nothing.

But the point of irreverence is more worthy to be considered. Everything relating to our Lord should be matter of profoundest reverence. Nothing at variance with it can be defended. Is it then irreverent in itself to attempt pictorial representations of Christ? or does the contemplation of them tend to produce an irreverent spirit? I cannot admit it. Our Lord, though the Son of God, was also as truly a man as any of us. He had a determinate human form and lineaments. He led a historical life on earth—speaking, acting as a man, though in a Divine-human way. Minute details of that life in many of its parts and actions have, by Divine ordering, come down to us. These, it is our duty to study and to realize as historical facts with all the vividness we are capable of. To do this implies and requires, and therefore justifies, the exertion of the imaginative faculty in every one in the measure of its gift. And if, in attempting to realize in a true, living way the historical life of Christ on the earth, we cannot help framing to ourselves, in our thoughts, in our fancy and our imagination, quite determinate representations of Him and of His wonderful acts of Divine Power and Love; if this be not only lawful and right, but good and salutary—as must, I think, be allowed by every one, how can we think it irreverent for the artist to embody in sensible form, in marble, or on canvas, those representations which, as a devout believer, earnestly pondering the story of the Saviour's Life and Death, his imagination cannot but frame? What is there in the spirit of the profoundest reverence which should deter him from sketching in lines and colors the pictures which cannot but paint themselves before his "mind's eye," any more than the poet from giving form "in winged words" to the images that crowd before his "vision and faculty divine"? And how should a reverent spirit prompt us to turn away from the one more than from the other? A just taste may be offended, our very reverence may be shocked, by a work false to the true principles of art, or by an unworthy conception embodied in the work of an artist not wanting in genius; a just taste, I think, is offended by such works as Ruben's "Taking Down from the Cross"—so merely human, so merely physical human, is the paramount and almost sole expression of the piece: but this is, of course, no proof that the delineation of our Lord's person is itself

incompatible with the spirit of proper reverence.

Such, in substance, I believe, are the thoughts I expressed to our friend in afterwards conversing with him on the subject of his letter. Whether or not my utterances, or the better working of his own thoughts, are to have the credit of leading him to any change in his views, I cannot say. But I am sure all who have been in his studio, and seen his picture of Christ going to Emmaus, will be glad to think that the scruples expressed in his letter passed for a time, at least, from his mind; and to hope that work may not be the only production of the kind coming from his pencil. And all who know what a pure and lofty Christian spirit animates his genius, will, I think, be agreed in the opinion that there is no painter in our land or times better fitted to contribute to the glory of Christian Art.

GENEVA, July 25th, 1856.

ART AMONG THE HEBREWS.

THE TEMPLE OF SOLOMON.

(Translated for THE CRAYON, from the French of F. E. De Mercey.)

Of the many races that have appeared on this planet, the Jewish is that concerning which we possess written documents, the most exact and the most complete. Its history, its religion, its manners, its literature, are familiar to us; and while we possess neither a single Egyptian book, nor a single Assyrian treatise, the writings of its prophets, of its legislators, and of its kings, have all reached us entire.

Yet, by an inexplicable singularity, this people who have transmitted to us, such numerous and such certain written proofs of its existence, has left us no fragment of its statuary, of its painting; no inscription, no graven stone, no standing monument, which might materially testify, in a striking manner, to its sojourn on our globe. While the works of art of the Egyptians, of the Assyrians, of the Babylonians, or of the Greeks, abound among our collections, and give evidence, as it were, to an enviable extent, of the importance and grandeur of these nations, no museum can offer us a work of Jewish antiquity of incontestable authenticity.

The fine fragments of a royal sarcophagus, brought by our learned friend M. de Saulcy, from Jerusalem, and deposited in the Louvre, would appear, we know, to contradict the assertion. But, interesting as this monument may be, it presents only a secondary interest. It belongs rather to ornamental art, than to art properly so called. The style of its ornamentation is rather Phœnician than Jewish, as M. de Saulcy has himself proved by comparing a sarcophagus of stone to a sarcophagus of lead coming from Ronad (Aradnus) and bought at the bazar of Beyroul. Must we then absolutely confound the two arts?

The monuments that M. de Saulcy studied on the spot, during his voyage in the biblical countries, and of which he has given us such precise and interesting descriptions, might have modified certain ideas too absolute upon this complete obliteration of the vestiges left to us by the Hebrew people. For example, we no longer doubt, that the